'Every day is Earth Day' for advocates

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Body

April 22--Give Bethany Boback a choice between a classroom's four walls and a West Virginia ridgetop and Almost Heaven will win out every time.

She's a WVU education major who is also carrying a minor in the Wildlife and Fisheries program.

Every summer, she volunteers at education enrichment camps, taking youngsters on nature walks across Monongalia County and the region.

Every summer, she educates young minds on flora, fauna, waterways and all creatures great and small.

She wants to be a science teacher who emphasizes the outdoors in her lesson plans.

With a pedigree like that, you'd think she would have had April 22 circled in her day planner for months.

Right?

"Nope," she said Wednesday, at WVU's Mountainlair student union. "For me, every day is Earth Day."

She's referring to today's 46th annual observance of the environmental-awareness happening, first celebrated in 1970.

Across America, Earth Day is a traditional day of recycling drives, stream clean-ups and the like.

But, as Boback said, the work has to continue.

She doesn't want students and others to notch the day for service hours or corporate obligations, while moving on to the next thing April 23.

"I think a lot of it is about awareness," she said. "We do need to be stewards of the Earth and our environment."

That can be a tall order in West Virginia, she said, which still counts coal mining as its chief industry.

The state is also in the boom-or-bust climate of natural gas exploration in the Marcellus shale, an energy-rich, prehistoric rock formation that rests thousands of feet down across most of Appalachia.

There's that, and mountaintop removal coal mining, which is also part of West Virginia's energy portfolio in recent years.

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A total of 500 mountains here to date have been gouged and leveled, according to Appalachian Voices, an advocacy organization with offices in Virginia, Kentucky, North Carolina and Tennessee.

And with the state trying to hold on to its cash crop, the debate over whether climate change is man-made or simply a natural shift continues to kick up the dust.

In the meantime, though, there's still Earth Day today. Wednesday at the Mountainlair, that meant planting seeds of awareness.

WVU's Environmental Health and Safety division was staffing a table that day, with a diorama demonstrating how the university manages its storm water runoff to keep pollution out of streams and waterways.

The division also offered up a mini-questionnaire on the environment, with 12 multiple-choice challenges, mainly on how we deal with the things we simply throw away, and the things we reycle (or not).

Students taking the quiz got a free flower grown by their university agriculture comrades for the effort.

In case you're wondering, the answer to Question No. 9 was "B" -- No, you should not remove the nozzle from an aerosol can before recycling, because its contents could still be released to the environment. It's also a safety issue, since the aerosal can could still be under pressure, even if it appears to be empty.

"The questionnaire gets young people thinking about the environment, if they aren't already," said Teresa Hefferin, the division's assistant director.

"This is their world, and they're the generation that can do something."

The day the river burned

As she walked by the table, student Danielle Gibson agreed with Boback: People should be thinking about the environment every day, not just one designated on a calendar.

Historically, Gibson knows what pollution can do. Her hometown was notorious for it. Gibson is a Cleveland native, and the Cuyahoga River, which flows through the city, was once so polluted that it actually caught fire in 1969.

Today, her family calls West Virginia's southern coalfields home. Her engineer father took a job in Logan County. Mining, for better or worse, has environmentally shaped West Virginia, she said.

"Earth Day is every day and pollution is everybody's problem," said Gibson, who is majoring in biomedical engineering.

In the world of her college major and chosen career path, she knows that if the Earth is "sick" -- its inhabitants will be also.

Gibson is hopeful for the planet's environmental fortunes, she said, even if the rehabilitation is a global-sized job.

"If we want to 'fix' things, if we want things to come back, we have to start now."

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